
Conference Snapshots

The Student's Tale

Well, it wasn't like David Lodge's *Small World*; but then we didn't expect it to be. BERA conference 1986 was a friendly, informal gathering of academics and teachers (*lots* of teachers — it felt like being back at school — "Hey, yes, you at the back! Are you paying attention?") who had come to exchange research papers, ideas and gossip. There seemed to be little going on in the way of power struggles and back-stabbings — although it may have all been happening behind the scenes, and we just happened to miss it.

After all, my co-conference Krutika Tanna and myself, were naive and wide-eyed PhD students, not quite sure what to look for, and naturally overawed by the plethora (to us) of famous names. The following conversation became a standard joke:

"As David Hargreaves said in his paper —"
"Do you mean *the* David Hargreaves?"

For David Hargreaves, substitute any one of a number of names whom we had read or heard of but had never met — and most of whom didn't look at all like they should have done — too old, too young, too slim, too fat, too tall, too short. Most of them lost their mystique in the meeting. Not quite having the nerve to bounce up to The Famous Ones and say "Hi, I'm Kim Thomas, I'm sure you'd love to hear about my research", I became adept at a more syncophantic form of introduction which went "Hello, I was very interested in your paper, I *must* ask you about that point you made . . ."

The quality of the sessions varied considerably, and there seemed to be a clear divide between what sociologists find interesting and what teachers find interesting. Sociologists, of course, are all out to prove that teachers are instruments of social and political control, and love nothing more than a piece of research which demonstrates conclusively that teachers are racist, sexist and rather dim. Teachers, on the other hand, do not take this view. What teachers find interesting are endless discussions on new teaching schemes and new examination syllabi, and the more initials, the better. TVEI, GCSE, CPVE — they all signify a world which only teachers and educational administrators can enter.

The best session I attended was one on the ethics of educational research, partly because of the excellence of the papers, but perhaps more

because there was plenty of time given to discussion (and this only because one contributor had been unable to turn up). It was a great relief to be able to engage in debate instead of sitting for hours being talked at. I also managed to say something, and nobody shouted at me for being stupid, which was a pleasant surprise.

The session in which Krutika and I gave our papers was somewhat disappointing in that the audience was small — but then again, we did get written up in the *THES* — Yah, boo, sucks! The report was a *little* inaccurate — and if the Times Higher Ed gets it wrong, what hope is there for the *Sun*?

So, we left the conference with mixed feelings — good time was had, new friends were gained and useful contacts made(?), but, although many of the sessions were both enjoyable and interesting, the conference wasn't as intellectually demanding as we'd perhaps expected. As mere beginners in the field, we'd hoped that we might have had to work a bit harder at some of the papers or have struggled with new and difficult ideas, but that didn't happen. BERA 1987 — a task for you?

Kim Thomas, University of Aston

Happenings, Happenings

I enjoyed BERA in Bristol — both intellectually and socially. I've not been to a BERA conference since 1980, and my memory is of rather dreary surroundings, lots of general sessions and long bus rides out to the halls. Maybe that's unfair to Cardiff. But I think that BERA has grown up. This time the symposia were focussed, with, by and large, well researched papers and knowledgeable audiences. I heard one piece of self-indulgent drivel (well, to be precise, I only heard half before I left), and one speaker who read from his script in a dreary monotone. But otherwise the presentations were lively. Some even demanded audience participation — with suitably ethical safeguards for those who didn't want to be involved!

Now for the really important things. The food was OK — although I'd have appreciated the chance to make do with a sandwich in the bar for lunch. The rooms were near enough for an afternoon nap, and the downs were near enough for an afternoon walk. The wine flowed at the publishers' receptions, and the bar was open late into the evenings. Which is to say that, despite the after-

dinner papers, there was plenty of social time. And enough faces, new and old, to make the social time some of the most productive. Heaven forbid that we should get as large as AERA (3,000 was it, at their last conference?) where you never see the same person twice. But thank goodness we've grown beyond the stage where you run out of things to say and people to say them to by lunchtime on the third day.

All of which makes the goings-on at the AGM totally farcical. Here have an organisation which is improving all the time, achieving financial stability and a steadily growing membership. A hard working Executive Committee is elected by the membership and meets several times a year to attend, on a voluntary basis, to BERA business. Its one of the most bureaucratic committees I've been involved with — far more so than my Department or my political party. Throughout the year there has been a series of debates on minor organisational issues, which, on balance, have slightly reduced the bureaucracy. So far, so good. Then, without any warning or chance of reply, we get a report to the AGM from the Executive Officer which describes the committee meetings as 'happenings', and implies that BERA is ungovernable! Quoting in evidence **his own** opinions from last year! Hasn't he heard of losing gracefully? None of the committee quite knew how to respond to this fit of pique, and we ended up voting on a motion that the Executive should behave in a more business-like manner in future (whatever that means — can you imagine voting against it?) What a performance!

But back to more pleasant memories. David Hargreaves in mellow mood, apparently deciding that sociology of education has something to offer after all. Israeli liqueur at the conference dinner, lollipops at the Presidential address. The student with gallstones fighting her pain and her anxiety to give her paper — and giving it. Bridge 'till two in the morning. Why do razor blades float, and what's the difference between surface tension and God? All in all, a good conference.

Alison Kelly, University of Manchester

My Seminar Runneth Over?

Looked at from the morning after, my strong memories of the 1986 conference revolve round the accommodation and the seminars. Wills Hall with its 'cloister', 'quadrangle' and 'staircases' was built to remind its tutors of the Oxford they had, no doubt, reluctantly left behind. Goodness knows what today's undergraduates think of the gothic architecture and equally gothic ablutions.

For my part, one personal myth was shattered. I always thought narrow beds (and small rooms) were a function of the UGC cuts of the 1970s. I now realise that narrow beds in the large rooms of Wills Hall reflect the sexual morality of its redbrick founding fathers, not any post-Keynesian theories about education as a form of consumption.

Year by year the venue for the conference changes. But there seems to be one thing that stays the same: the tinned tomatoes that are served up, swimming in liquid, at every conference breakfast time. Indeed, just as hall bursars cosset the world of JCRs, high table, and the like, so domestic bursars seem to be the last bastion of the English breakfast (fried bread, sausage and all). Wills Hall was certainly a reminder of times past. The only things missing were a woodbine climbing up the wall and a ghost that coughed.

Perhaps it was these old-style domestic arrangements that made the seminars stand out. I recall that, in early days, the BERA conference committee struggled to ensure that conference sessions ran more smoothly. They had been pestered, no doubt, by people complaining about rambling presentations, inadequate circulation of material and insensitive timekeeping. Guidelines were subsequently produced and have been reproduced annually in *Research Intelligence*. At Bristol I was very impressed by four features of the sessions I attended. The topics were of general educational interest; speakers received equal amounts of time; participants who chose to read a paper did so from texts consciously prepared for delivery 'into the ear'; and, perhaps most strikingly, contributors gave attention to the range of interests (and levels of prior knowledge) in the audience. In the past BERA has sometimes paid only lip service to these (two-way) communication issues. The Bristol conference confirmed for me, therefore, that educational inquiry need not be an arcane, elitist, and mystifying enterprise.

David Hamilton, University of Glasgow

Mellow Moments

Arrived at 1.55 on the 4th. The seminar on the assisted places scheme starts at 2.00. The *Conference Registration works smoothly and I'm in the seminar for 2.00*. The presentations are well prepared and it's good to see the commitment of the researchers. Richard Pring, the Chair, has taken the notes for guidance seriously and there is

time for questions, answers and supplements. No joy for the government from the researcher's findings.

It's good to see old friends in the bar before dinner. There's a fraternal spirit in the social area and I find myself warmly disposed to members of the professoriat. It's ten years since my first BERA and I must be mellowing. There's Jean Rudduck, who organised the teacher/researcher day at Sheffield for BERA '85 — the worry of organising a symposium takes over and I feel anxious about the organisation of the teacher/researcher day on Saturday.

After dinner I'm chairing a session from 8.00 to 9.30 with Mantz Yorke and Michael Bassey. Mantz I've only just met and we share similar ideas on staff development. Michael can't stay on later tonight. That's a pity because three of my research students wanted to meet him on Saturday to talk about his earlier work on generalisation. Talk goes on in the bar until late.

Friday — an early start on education policy and schooling practices. The papers are well prepared and, as yesterday, there is a concern to stimulate discussion.

2.00 the AGM. BERA AGMs are never boring. The first hour-and-a-half provoked irritation, fury, and a scenario to do justice to a Monty Python sketch. The AGM reconvened at 5.30 and our new president, Bryan Dockrell, fairly bristling with managerial efficiency, dispatched the business in 30 minutes. I looked forward to Bryan's presidential address in the evening, feeling sure that he would share a vision of education and research which would help us to sustain our faith in the educational values and methods which characterise our research.

On Saturday we had a full house for the teacher/researcher day. The teachers appear to have established themselves at BERA as an important strand in the programme and we are already planning a contribution for BERA '87 in Manchester. The Conference dinner helped to reinforce the pleasure of being within a community of educational researchers and raised questions about the effectiveness of health education in curtailing the consumption of alcohol by academics.

The Sunday morning symposium on children and primary practice followed the pattern of the previous days with good audience participation. I left on a glorious afternoon, delighted with the

conference and hoping that Tricia Broadfoot felt a tremendous sense of satisfaction with the positive feedback from the participants.

Jack Whitehead, University of Bath

Did They Promise Us a Rose Garden?

... And so by British Rail to BERA in Bristol; and, ultimately, to the pseudo-Oxbridge pile built on the proceeds of the deeds of a narcotic baron. The morality of the links between categorical funding from hazy money and the respectability of pure knowledge must have seemed much simpler in those days before the government found it necessary to issue health warnings on some of the package deals.

And on the train, packed with right-wing geriatrics going late in season to frolic in the West Country, was much swapping of policy statements and instant remedies for current issues concerning society in general and education in particular, based on snippets culled from the *Mail*. Meantime we read in our *Guardian* that even now we were already late for the conference. Apparently the paper on the Assisted Places Scheme to be given today had already been given yesterday. This we knew not to be so; nor was the substance of the paper reported accurately, we were informed as we settled into the lavatory-lacking, tobacco-coloured Wills Hall of Residence. In the evening, to the rose garden to sup freely of a publisher's warm wine. Is that why their books are so expensive? Then a monastically frugal bite to eat. After dark to an overcrowded room to be harranged by a person determined not to give a paper, but rather wind up the audience. Left feeling taut rather than stretched. Recovered by a bout of de-tensioning, with old friends, in the bar till late.

Up betimes next day to an all-day symposium at which we were scheduled to make a contribution. A gentle and humane session; which again underlined just how important different contexts are for giving new perspectives about the same things. Left wondering what messages the TES reporter would choose to select from it all for next Friday's edition, given that that very day an HMI report on LAPP was made public. Another chance to gain further insights into the weighting given to the first or second part of Lawrence Stenhouse's dictum that research is "systematic enquiry made public"? Another evening of wine tasting, courtesy of another publisher. Worried about whether they will come back next year because they had been

banished to ply their wares in a cold and gloomy chapel away from the main arenas of discourse and dispute.

The final day for us. Does anybody ever stay to the end? Perhaps there is a research project there for our sociological friends? Though judging by one insensitive presentation in the all-day policy and practice symposium some of them, though frequently having something worthwhile saying, find difficulty in saying it. One would have thought that with all that stuff on interaction they would by now be able to practice what they preach. The afternoon enlivened by David Hargreaves' well delivered thoughts cobbled together on a train, and by Brian Simon's elegant and shrewd analysis of the new forms of the old divisions that are still around. Thence to the civic reception; and a much better dinner with wine and much merry-making. And so very late to bed. There did me think on the prospect of spending two days next week, at a pleasant east coast watering hole, with senior officials of HMI and DES. No doubt after BERA another chance to reflect on the place of 'eye-balling' visits and 'consensus' reporting techniques; and of their influence upon informing policy about practice. Surely such a gathering will authoritatively resolve the issue, "It ain't what you say but the way that you say it . . . ?"

And so to sleep; but not to dream.

Roy Haywood,
University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Summoned by Wills

*Here among late-vacated rooms,
Provided by tobacco fumes,
Here where my pupils will not walk
I come; for 'education talk'.
Keen and alert I spent four days
Within this grand, mock-tudor maze.
I found my cool but airy room
In Y block's tendency to gloom.
The showers rather bothered me,
As all but one worked scaldingly.
My drier too exposed a flaw —
The points were all round pin and small!*

*Christmas and Easter may be terms
Where teachers teach to pupils' squirms,
And so my Whitsun. All the same*

*It raises questions does this game.
Then comes a chance to air them all
At BERA's Autumn Festival,
When I can hear my queries raised,
With ears that wait to be amazed.
I climb the highly polished stair,
To find that food is waiting there.
I scrambled over benches wide,
Must eat if brain's to be applied.*

*It is enjoyable to look
At items I've not had to cook,
And how enlivening one finds
The people with enquiring minds,
Who come to eat with thoughts to share,
Who've fieldwork notes and data rare.
With new found friends and one desire
To have our consciousness raised higher,
We choose our group from 'This' and 'That',
Then go to see what 'They' are at.
A speaker waits the chairman's nod
And then he speaks . . . it's rather odd.
The subject's billed, as 'Adult Ed.',
We get 'Ethnography' instead.
As earnest folk from rooms far flung
Come in to hear what's just begun,
We, under cover of our notes,
Slink out with 'Sorry' in our throats.
A lowly teacher, that is I
Who's not been elevated high,
Yet here it isn't thought as wrong
To have opinions — hot and strong.
For me, in class, the whole year through,
It's good to talk with people who,
Except at this time of the year
Don't often in the flesh appear!*

*In academe I'm sure they know
What's going on both high and low.
That teachers only get to do
What their Headmistress tells them to.
They read the timetable each day,
And pray that no staff are away,
And just like me, no more nor less,
Worship each week the DES.*

*But all the same it's grand for me
To see what fun research can be,
With people who don't mind at all
They've shared their knowledge at Wills' Hall.*

Jane Taylor,
Derbyshire College of Higher Education
(with apologies to John Betjeman).